

Infantry In Action



LEIPZIG

MAJOR CHARLES MacDONALD

EDITOR'S NOTE: Although this article does not deal with a purely tactical situation, it illustrates graphically the problems company commanders may be called upon to solve in a combat situation. It is reprinted from the In-

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For a few brief ecstatic moments I dared to hope that I might become famous as the soldier who, single-handedly, captured Leipzig, prewar Germany's fifth largest city. The travesty that I recount here began on April 18, 1945, when Leipzig was one of the few remaining major prizes left to combat forces in Europe. I was commander of Company G, 23d Infantry, 2d Division.

We had been attacking for two weeks through the flak-infested eastern approaches to Leipzig in an erratic, lengthy and exhaustive campaign against scattered opposition. On the day of what I choose to call *le debacle* I spent a none-too-pleasant afternoon with my 150 infantry associates astride the city dump overlooking the Weisse-Elster canal. It was our desire to cross the canal, via a wooden railroad bridge, and dig in for the night in an orchard that faced the towering buildings of the Gohlis sector of the city some 800 yards away. But a group of cantankerous Germans objected, and fired rifle and machinegun bullets at us. A rifle platoon under Lieutenant John W. Whitman convinced the Germans that we were better men than they by wading the canal and abolishing the opposition in a flanking movement.

The rifle platoons dug in, and soon thereafter Lieutenant Whitman appeared at my CP with Staff Sergeant Joe Weylandt, and a German officer, who, to my amazement, knowing GI souvenir values, continued to carry his pistol in its holster.

Whitman, only twenty-two, was aglow with excitement, like a kid about to visit his first county fair.

"Want to capture Leipzig?" he asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

I just looked at him.

"This is an *Oberleutenant* from Leipzig," he said, indicating the German officer who bowed and smiled at the reference. "His CO wants to surrender the city without a fight. A mob of civilians streamed down the road from those big buildings while we were eating supper. They jabbered at me until I finally made out that they wanted us to go back into town with them. They said a German major with 600 men wanted to surrender.

"Weylandt and I walked back into town with a bunch of them, and they took us to the police station. We talked to the major. He not only wants to surrender his 600 men, but he said his commanding general would surrender the whole damned city, if I'd go back and get my CO."

It seemed incredible to me that the usually clever Germans would employ such an obvious ruse. It was too obvious to be a trick. Still I felt that I had to voice a protest.

"Now wait a minute. Does he know I'm just a captain? Will he surrender to a captain?"

"Yeah, we told him that. But he said it doesn't matter. A captain's good enough."

I felt like bowing gratefully.

"The *Oberleutenant* here came along so you'd believe us. He'll tell you."

He spoke to the German officer in German mixed with gestures, mostly gestures, and the *Oberleutenant* looked

at me and smiled widely, shaking his head up and down, grunting, "Ja wohl! Ja wohl! Ist gut! Ist gut!"

Such rhetoric convinced me. "I'll go," I said, "but I'll have to get an OK from battalion first."

I went inside to telephone and Whitman followed me.

"I'll talk to him if he says 'no,'" he said. "You've just got to go, Cap'n. It's on the level. I swear it is. I can tell by the way the whole set-up looks. You've got to go."

The colonel was not at battalion, but I talked with Major Vern L. Joseph. (I mention his name because I hold him partly responsible. If he had only said no, this entire idiotic scheme might have died in infancy.) The major indicated that perhaps I was joking, but I finally convinced him. Whereupon he said, "I'll have to talk to regiment."

The chain of command creaked into gear. We waited while he called regiment, and Whitman told me more details. Finally I called the major again.

"The colonel's out at regiment," Major Joseph said, "but they'll call me back in a few minutes. They've called division."

I gulped and hung up. I had thought of this thing as a purely local action that would not embroil division and higher headquarters until after it appeared in the papers.

I called battalion again.

"Regiment hasn't heard from division," Major Joseph said. "I'll call regiment again and you can talk to the exec. I think they called corps for a decision."

Corps! That was the last headquarters before army, and army was next to last before Supreme Headquarters! I shuddered and wondered what General Eisenhower would say.

TOO LATE

But it was too late to do anything about it. The regimental executive officer was on the phone, and I had to explain the situation hastily. "... we can't wait much longer, sir. It's getting almost too dark now."

The executive officer said, "All right. Keep in touch with your battalion and let us know how you come out."

I took Private First Class Walter G. Harms with me as interpreter, and Private First Class Harold G. Wesmiller brought an SCR 300. Lieutenant Whitman and Sergeant Weylandt took seats in the lead jeep with me, and the *Oberleutenant* sat in full view on the right front fender, looking every bit the martyr of the German nation.

We debated as to whether or not we should carry a white flag, and then decided that would look as if we were surrendering, which we most certainly were *not*.

The men from the rifle platoon cheered us as we passed their dug-in positions, and I found that I was not so much afraid as I was tremendously excited, I kept telling myself. After all, I was about to accept the surrender of Germany's fifth largest city.

Pardon me, Herr General, but even now the forces of Company G lay siege at the gates of your fortress city. Would you care to surrender, please?

The buildings of the city rose abruptly from the far end of the orchard. The road was lined with curious civilians streaming toward the railroad bridge to view the fabled Americans, forcing our jeep to progress at a snail-like pace. As we entered the city the streets seemed deserted, compared to the mass of people who had lined the road through the orchard, but here and there a group of civilians stopped to stare at us, and I was relieved. We had come to know that where there were civilians, to paraphrase an old adage, there was no fire — at least, no enemy fire.

Whitman directed the jeep driver to the police station, an imposing three-story building which, with its surrounding grounds, occupied an entire block at the end of the street and except for the lack of moors reminded me of Wuthering Heights. A tall iron grill fence enclosed the grounds, and we drew up to a gate where two Germans in uniform stood guard.

Civilians appeared from every direction, crowding around us and jabbering excitedly. German soldiers passing by, their weapons slung over their shoulders or about their waists, stopped abruptly at the sight of the crowd around the two jeeps and their mouths dropped open in astonishment at the sight of OD uniforms.

Whitman and Sergeant Weylandt took command of the situation at the gate as if this were old home week. The smartly uniformed guards smilingly opened the gates when Whitman's broken German told them that *Der Kommandant* had arrived to effect the surrender. We passed through the gate to the rear of the building. As we neared the rear entrance three German officers walked stiffly toward us.

"The tall one, that's the major," Whitman said in a stage whisper. "He's the one who says they'll surrender."

The immaculately groomed officers made me suddenly conscious of my shabby appearance. Their stiffly pressed uniforms contrasted sharply with my own dirty nondescript combination, their jaunty visored officer caps looking like "Brother Rat" in contrast to my own combat helmet with its bedraggled camouflage net. I felt my beard, unshaven for at least a week, and wondered if I shouldn't have prepared more extensively for this operation.

I wondered whether I should salute, unable to remember anything in the Army manuals in those pre-VJ-days that had described the decorum of accepting a formal enemy surrender, particularly in the stronghold of the enemy. In my ignorance I decided that it would be best to salute anything that closely resembled an officer, and I did.

The German major returned the salute and proffered his hand, startling me with the move so that he must have seen my ill composure. I had no desire to shake hands with a German officer, but I recovered quickly and grasped his hand firmly, if not warmly.

He led us upstairs to a room that was luxuriously furnished with upholstered chairs, a deep rug and an attrac-



tive girl, whose appearance made me wary lest Whitman or Weylandt let out a GI wolf call. Another group of stiffly correct officers rose as we entered. The major introduced me, pausing for me to say my name. I smiled profusely as a substitute for saluting, which I decided would not be appropriate indoors.

We sat down, and the room became a confused jumble of mixed languages. The major tried to talk with me in German, seeming offended when I said *nicht verstehe* and calling the girl to translate for him. No matter what may be said for her anatomy, her English was weak, so I summoned Harms. Whitman was not content to be excluded from the conversation, and he broke in at intervals with scrambled German and English that made the Germans roar with laughter.

I finally made out the German major's story from the mixed translations of Harms and the girl.

POLICE

He and his men, he said, were not German soldiers, although their uniforms, customs and weapons were practically identical with the Wehrmacht's. They were policemen of the Leipzig police force, 2,500 strong, with 600 quartered here at the Gohlis station. The city was filled with displaced persons and German civilians, and they wanted to avoid any fighting, if possible. He knew that Germany was *kaput* and nothing was to be gained by making a battleground of the city.

The commanding general of the police force was of the same opinion and was willing to guarantee that there would be no fighting by the policemen and civilians, if we would assure them there would be no shooting on our part, and the policemen could retain control of the civilians even after our entry.

The situation was absurd. I thought perhaps the man was possessed. When I asked, he told me the commanding general had absolutely no control over the Wehrmacht. But most of the soldiers had left the city that

morning. He did not think we would have much to worry about in the way of German soldiers.

Despite the major's confidence, I saw my dreams of newspaper headlines fading, and I feared that General Eisenhower would be very disappointed in me. Perhaps that fear made me tenacious, and I refused to give up. We argued back and forth for what seemed like hours, and darkness fell outside. Finally, the major offered a suggestion in a tone that insinuated a momentous announcement.

"I will take you to see the general," Harms translated.

The major called for an orderly and sent for his car, dispatching a second orderly for cognac. Whitman's eyes lighted up perceptibly as the orderly returned with cocktail glasses on a silver tray and poured drinks around.

I decided that I must be quite mad. I had never envisioned a social hour with a group of German officers, and certainly not with the German officers as my hosts.

The orderly returned with the information that the car awaited us outside. I left Whitman in charge of the group remaining at the police station until I should return, and with Harms I went outside where the chauffeur waited in a luxurious Mercedes-Benz.

I had not the slightest idea where we were going, except that I was to confer with the commanding general near the center of the city. I wondered if we had to pass through any German army defenses to reach our destination, but evidently the police officers commanded the respect of the Wehrmacht, and I felt relatively safe while in their company, I kept telling myself.

I involuntarily sank lower in the deep back seat, however, when a German sentry stopped us in the middle of the dark street. I wondered what would be his reaction should he see two Americans in the automobile, but he asked no questions. He wanted to tell us that it was impossible to go up the street we were following. We could not reach the center of town by this route. The Americans were firing artillery.

The driver turned the big car around, not without ef-

fort, and we retraced our route toward the Gohlis police station.

The major suggested, through Harms, that I might contact American headquarters on my radio and have them stop the artillery. I mulled over the suggestion and realized from what little I had been able to determine about the direction in which we had been traveling that we had been driving toward the southeast, and that would be the 69th Division sector. Getting artillery fire stopped there would necessitate contacting corps headquarters. I would have enough wrath called down upon me if this mission failed without interrupting the operations of another division, so I was a bit thankful when we reached the police station and found that Wesmiller had been unable to make contact with the radio.

The major said that perhaps the telephone lines were not out and he would try to call the general and that we should wait inside the police station. We went into a large room on the first floor and there found Lieutenant Whitman, a bit under the influence of cognac, entertaining a group of German enlisted men, who, for lack of better fascination, were fascinated with the Indian head on the 2d Division shoulder patches.

Whitman had a colored blanket wrapped around his body, and placing his fingers behind his head to indicate feathers, he did a war dance around the room.

The Germans loved it, roaring something in their native tongue which I took to mean, "we love it." Further to indicate their love they produced another bottle of cognac as if by magic, pouring drinks for all of us.

The major finally completed his telephone call, and Harms and I followed him outside again to the car. I had not the slightest idea of how he intended getting past the

artillery fire, but he seemed to have thought of something, and I did not think I was exactly in a position to question his actions. The driver turned to the right up a narrow side street, and we found ourselves beneath an arched roof lit by a dim blue blackout light. A uniformed German sentry snapped to attention and raised his right hand in the Nazi salute, barking simply, but with meaning:

"Heil Hitler!"

He opened the door of the car stiffly. The major alighted and returned his salute. He opened the rear door for me. We found ourselves in a well lit marble corridor. Guards, stationed at intervals along the walls, snapped to attention as we passed, giving stiff *"Heil Hitler"* salutes. The major and the lieutenant returned the salutes, and I wondered what the guards thought of the two disheveled Americans, but their stony faces told me nothing. A stiff guard at the end of the corridor gave the Nazi salute and indicated that we should follow him. He led us up a graceful marble circular staircase, and into a room on the second floor. It was elaborately furnished with an oval mahogany conference table in the center surrounded by ornate mahogany chairs. The carved ceiling was high, and the walls were decoratively paneled. The floor again was marble.

The major motioned us to be seated, the general would be with us shortly.

Suddenly the major barked a command that must have said "attention," and the general appeared at the door. The two officers and the orderly stood stiffly at attention. Harms and I rose, and I found myself unintentionally imitating the Germans' stiff military stance. The general gave some command which must have been "at



ease" and entered the room.

I was conscious of my appearance again. The general was even more immaculately dressed than the others, a long row of military decorations across his chest. His face was round and red and cleanly shaven. A monocle in his right eye made him look for all the world like a combination of Eric von Stroheim and Humphrey Bogart.

I wondered if I should salute, but the general's outstretched hand told me differently. I shook his hand and mumbled my name. He indicated three other officers and a brown-suited civilian who entered with him. The civilian, a slim, middle-aged, grey-haired man who might have been out of something by Sinclair Lewis, explained in English that he was the general's interpreter.

"Before the war I studied at the University of Chicago," he said in impeccable English that bore only a trace of an accent. "When the war began, I was professor of English at the University of Bern."

The general motioned us to take seats, and Harms and I sat on the right of the table with the major and lieutenant who had come with us from Gohlis. The general took his seat at the head of the table, the civilian interpreter on his left, and the other three officers, whom I took to be ranking — at least, well braided — members of his staff, to the left of the interpreter.

The general rose, raising his glass and proposing a toast in German. We all stood and drank. I didn't know if I was drinking to long life for Adolf or what, but I drank.

The conference settled down to its purpose, and the general talked long and rapidly, like a spoiled child. The civilian had to break in at intervals to interpret.

His story proved to be relatively the same as that told me by the major earlier in the evening, and my hopes for the capitulation of the city took another nose dive. He was concerned about controlling the thousands of displaced persons in Leipzig and would guarantee there would be no resistance from the policemen, but he had absolutely no control over the Wehrmacht. He tried to assure me that most of the soldiers had abandoned the city, and also he did not know where to contact the commanding officer of the Wehrmacht forces.

The conversation went in circles, always returning to the fact that the general could not guarantee there would be no fight from the German army. I began to see his situation clearly — he was anxious to keep his police in control, but he had attempted negotiations too early. He should have waited until our forces actually entered the city and then contacted our military government officials. The general obviously was an eager beaver.

I looked at my watch and was surprised to see that it was almost midnight. I wondered if my men at the Gohlis police station had given me up. No doubt battalion and regiment — and perhaps General Eisenhower — considered me lost. I had had no communication with them since we first entered the city at dusk.

I wanted to tell the German general that the situation was hopeless, but I declined to admit defeat. What was

more important, he might refuse to allow us to return if we said there was nothing we could do about the negotiations. I suggested that he and his staff come with me to my battalion headquarters to contact my CO — the colonel. The word "colonel" seemed magical, and they rose quickly from the table, ready to go.

At battalion headquarters the commander was asleep. Major Joseph did not want to awaken him, so I told him my story, at least admitting that I did not think anything was going to come of the surrender negotiations.

While Major Joseph talked with the German officers, I found that battalion had established radio contact with my men in the Gohlis police station. I radioed them to come back out of the city. They seemed a bit irritated at the order since they were bedded down comfortably for the night.

BACK THROUGH LINES

Major Joseph told me that he was keeping the Germans there for the night and sending them to Corps Military Government in the morning. He wanted me, however, to take the major and lieutenant back through our lines. They would telephone the general's office to let them know what had become of the old man.

I felt like the swimmers when the newsreel is run backward, but we preceded the Mercedes-Benz in a jeep, and I led the officers back to the bombed sector through which we had passed earlier, and then returned to my CP.

It was 0400, and the men had returned from the Gohlis police station. Wesmiller said they had been worried about me and Harms, but from his story of a riotous night, I could not see how they found much time for worry.

Thus did my negotiations fall through. I think it only fair to myself, however, that I continue the story and explain that my night's work had not been completely in vain.

My company was assigned the mission of taking the Gohlis police station that afternoon. We entered in assault formation, but the presence of civilians in the streets indicated that there would be no resistance, and they seemed less interested in us now than they had been the night before. Evidently, they persisted in the belief that the city had already surrendered and our entrance now was anticlimactic.

I solicited a ride in a company jeep to check on the disposition of the rifle platoons. I could find no evidence of the second platoon in the sector south of the police station where they should have been, so we drove on. An underpass beneath a railroad track loomed ahead of us. This was to have been the limiting point for the company's advance, but I saw a group of GIs beyond the tracks.

We rode up beside them, and I recognized Technical Sergeant Wesley I. Phillips, the platoon sergeant. "I thought you knew not to go past the tracks," I said. "Where's Lieutenant Whitman?"

"I know Cap'n," Sergeant Phillips replied, "but the lieutenant saw all these nice buildings over here and decided to have a look at them."

I saw Whitman with Sergeant Weylandt approaching down the street, and I tried to think of what Article of War he had violated. But something told me I was in for another crazy scheme of some sort, and I steeled myself against becoming a party to it.

Whitman spoke before I could begin dressing him down for crossing the railroad. "There're sixty Germans and a lieutenant over there who want to surrender. It's a German Army garrison . . . *beaucoup* weapons and supplies."

I sighed. There was no use pretending. I would end up eventually going over to accept the surrender. It would save time if I gave in without argument.

"The lieutenant says they've been waiting to surrender ever since we first came in last night," Whitman continued, "and he's getting pretty tired of waiting. But he wants to surrender to at least a captain."

"Come on," I said. "Tell us where to go."

The street ended two blocks away at the German garrison area. A sentry stood at a massive iron gate leading into the grounds around a group of three-story stone barracks and warehouses. Whitman said something to the guard in a language that must have made the German wonder if, in heaven's name, the tongue of the Fatherland had come to this, but he clicked his heels, bowed slightly from the waist, and held out the keys of the gate to me.

SURRENDER

I took the keys and opened the gate. A group of Germans led by a stiff lieutenant, so resplendent in a neatly pressed uniform and shined boots that I expected to hear a bugle fanfare in the background, emerged from the nearest barracks. As we approached, the lieutenant stopped, clicked his heels and saluted smartly. He nodded his head to Whitman to indicate that he remembered him, and I knew Whitman's heart must have leaped up and scrambled thanks.

I decided to waste no time in this surrender. Either they did or they didn't. Standing in the open arena surrounded by hostile barracks was not to my liking.

"Tell him to bring all his weapons and pile them here at the gate," I told Whitman. "Then he can line up his men and we'll take them in."

The lieutenant acknowledged the order and repeated it to his noncommissioned officers. They saluted smartly and disappeared into the two nearest barracks. A single file of German soldiers, carrying rifles, machineguns, *panzerfausts* and pistols emerged from the buildings like disheartened chorus boys. They piled the weapons near the gate, and five men from Whitman's platoon began to break them against tree trunks.

The task was completed and the Germans lined up in

platoon formation with their baggage, looking somehow like travelers out of the *Canterbury Tales*. The officer stood in front of the formation to address his men, their bodies stiffly at attention, but their heads bowed slightly toward the ground as if the officer were a god and it was *verboten* to look upon the countenance thereof.

I gathered that the lieutenant was telling them the war was over for them and they were making an honorable surrender and at his command they should give one last *Heil Hitler*. He barked the command. Their heads snapped up as if someone had suddenly jerked on the reins and the bit hurt their mouths and shouted in unison *Heil Hitler!*

The officer did an about-face and indicated by a nod of his head that I should remove the pistol from about his waist. I did not like the idea of being told how to conduct the surrender, when I was the one supposedly in charge, but I did not feel inclined to disagree. For all I knew the other barracks might be filled with Germans, their rifles trained upon us, and, what was more important, I wanted the pistol.

Battalion had converted the police station into a PW enclosure. When I deposited the lieutenant, I noticed that the police major and his 600 policemen had become prisoners of war. I nodded toward the major, but he was in an ugly mood and gave no indication that he remembered me.

We were eating supper after dark in a restaurant which my kitchen force had liberated when I heard the approach of hundreds of hobnailed marching feet on the pavement outside. Hobnailed boots could mean only one thing — German soldiers. Outside I found a group of GIs approaching with over 200 German prisoners.

"We're from K Company," one of the guards said, when I asked. "We're on your left. Got those Germans out of a garrison across the railroad tracks."

My shudder must have been perceptible, even in the darkness. So these 200 Germans had been watching while I had unwittingly accepted the surrender of the German lieutenant and his sixty men!

I told the story inside.

"That's nothing, Cap'n," Whitman said. "Right after you left we found sump'n sitting around the corner of one of the barracks that sure made us feel silly . . . a brand new Mark IV tank ready for action."

"Whitman," I said, slowly and forcefully, "if you ever, ever decide to accept the surrender of any more Germans, you do so entirely on your own, or else you and yours will meet with drastic action too horrible to contemplate. Is that clear? I've had quite enough!"

After the uncontested Gohlis entry I might have been convinced that my mission to the police general had accomplished its purpose, through no fault of the general or myself, but I read in the papers that the 69th Division met stiff resistance in the center of the city where I had been on my peace mission. Thus, I know that those men could never be convinced, so I think it best that I remain the man who did *not* capture Leipzig.